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*Jewelry Workshops in the Frame of Modern
Town Life in the Western Balkans:
Cases of Shkodër (Albania), Ulcinj
(Montenegro) and Prizren (Kosovo)*

Abstract

Till the beginning of the XXth century jewelry making was one of the most expanded crafts in the Western Balkan towns. In Shkodër (Albania), Ulcinj (Montenegro) and Prizren (Kosovo) Albanian jewelers were consolidated into powerful esnafs (guilds) that not only possessed economical force, but also influenced social and cultural life in the town and neighborhood. The industrialization of these centers (Shkodër, Ulcinj and Prizren) impacted a lot on various craft guilds, but jewelry workshops managed to survive, retaining skills and traditions of the Balkan school of silver filigree and resisting the rush of cheap goods from Europe and Asia. The development of jewelry craft has been in liaison with political and social processes taking course in the region. Notwithstanding the fact that during the Yugoslav period jewelers in Prizren and Ulcinj were incorporated into the cooperative craft association under the governmental control, their work was a part of market relations and depended on the “demand and supply” terms. In Communist Albania’s Shkodër jewelers worked for the Craftsmen unions, but the assortment of goods, their price and quantity were dictated by the state. Nowadays after the disintegration of Yugoslavia and democratization of

Albania jewelers proved to be competitive, keeping up the wide variety of goods and their proper quality appreciated both by citizens and seasonal tourists. Jewelry producers, though they are not numerous, can be still regarded as the influential stratum of population in Shkodër, Ulcinj and Prizren.

Keywords: *jewelry; craft; Albania; Kosovo; terminology; lexica.*

For hundreds of years jewelry has been one of the most important crafts on the territory of the Western Balkans (Statovci 1982; Anamali, Spahiu 1988). The process of how the Albanians make golden and silver articles is one of the subjects of the researchers. During the fieldwork expeditions in the Western Balkans in the years of 1990-2013 the author has studied jewelry in Shkodër, Prizren and Ulcinj (МАЭ № 1937), and these data helped to enlarge the number of sources concerning the subject.

The jewelry craftsmanship in Albania had peaked in the 17-19th centuries (Shkodra 1973; Mitrushi 1977). The jewelers at that period were specialized mostly in silverwork (Gjergji 1988). They had a wide range of products that included jewelry for men (Fig. 1) and women (Fig. 2), dishes, household goods and church ware, and the most well-known among them are those made in the special technique of filigree (Alb. *filifran*, *-i*; Serb., Croat., Bosn., Mont. *Filigran*, Mac. *филлигран*) (Gjergji 1988; Stublla 2007; Asani 2009/2010; Асани 2011).



fig. 1 - Men ring. Silver, gold plated silver, colour glasses. Main technique: granulation. XIX century. Production: Shkodër, Albania. Collection of Bep Lufi, jeweler from Shkodër, Albania. 2009. Photo of Alexander Novik.



fig. 2 - Women jewelry “Cross”. Silver, gold plated silver, white metal, silver coins, colour glasses. Main technique: filigree. XIX – beginning of the XX century. Production: Shkodër, Albania. Collection of the Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography (Kunstkamera), Russian Academy of Sciences. Saint-Petersburg.

We can name several types of Albanian filigree technique. The most common is the so-called “*telish kafazeli filigree*” (Turkish – “fine wirework filigree”). For making filigree objects craftsmen traditionally use either nearly pure silver or copper-silver alloy¹ in the ratio from 39:10 to 60:40 (Mitrushi 1977; Новик 1997a).

Albanian craftsmen produce not only filigree jewelry, but also ornamental on lays for weaponry (Fig. 3), smoking implements (Fig. 4), dishes, and interior decoration items (Tirta 2006).



fig. 3 - Sword. Copper, colour glasses. Main techniques: filigree, savat. Beginning of the XX century. Production: Shkodër, Albania. Collection of Bep Lufi, jeweler from Shkodër, Albania. 2009. Photo of Alexander Novik.

¹ Compare to: (Юпато 1996).



Fig. 4 - Box for cigarettes. Silver. Main technique: filigree. Beginning of the XX century. Production: Shkodër, Albania. Collection of Bep Lufi, jeweler from Shkodër, Albania. 2009. Photo of Alexander Novik.

Museums of Albania, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, Turkey, Italy, Russia and elsewhere hold many items produced by Albanian craftsmen. They have been actively used in the research concerning the phenomenon of Albanian filigree, and Albanian jewelry on the whole, though the scholars practically have not taken private collections into account, and those items can be a source of interesting and new material on this subject (MAЭ № 1861; MAЭ № 1862; MAЭ № 1936; MAЭ № 1937; MAЭ № 1987; MAЭ № 1988).

In a number of predominantly Albanian-populated downtown areas of the Western Balkans, such as Shkodër, Prizren, Gjakova, Prishtina, Kruja, Ulcinj and others jewelry craftsmanship has achieved a high level of quality. Almost every town had its own jewelry school with its own technical peculiarities and artistic position (compare to: Gjergji 1989).

We would like to focus on the mentioned three centers that have been very important for the whole Balkan region during a long historical period.

Till the beginning of the 20th century jewelry making was one of the most expanded crafts in the Western Balkan towns (Shkodra 1973; Statovci 1982; Gross 1987). In Shkodër (Albania), Ulcinj (Montenegro) and Prizren (Kosovo) Albanian jewelers were consolidated into powerful *esnaf*s (“guilds” < Arabic *sünûf-un*) that not only possessed economical force, but also influenced social and cultural life in the town and its neighborhood (Shkodra 1973; compare to: Аджян 1979).

On the whole, crafts connected with metalwork (up to 20 % of the number of craftsmen) gave way only to leatherworkers and tanners (up to 40 % in different periods between the 17th and the beginning of the 20th cent.) (Shkodra 1973).

The industrialization of these centers (Shkodër, Ulcinj and Prizren) impacted a lot on various craft guilds, but jewelry workshops managed to survive, retaining skills and traditions of the Balkan school of silver filigree and resisting the rush of cheap goods from Europe and Asia.

The development of jewelry craft has been in liaison with political and social processes taking course in the region (Тодоров 1973; Тодоров 1976; Shkodra 1984; Арш и др. 1992). Notwithstanding the fact that during the Yugoslav period jewelers in Prizren and Ulcinj were incorporated into the cooperative craft association under the governmental control, their work was a part of market relations and depended on the “demand and supply” terms. In Communist Albania’s Shkodër jewelers worked for the Craftsmen unions, but the assortment of goods, their price and quantity were dictated by the state.

Nowadays after the disintegration of former Yugoslavia and democratization of Albania jewelers proved to be competitive, keeping up the wide variety of goods and their proper quality appreciated both by citizens and seasonal tourists (Fig. 5). Jewelry producers, though they are not numerous, can still be regarded as the influential stratum of population in Shkodër, Ulcinj (Fig. 6) and Prizren.



fig. 5 - Young consummator at the dyqan ('shop') of Gjon Marku. Prizren. Kosovo. 2012. Photo of Alexander Novik.

We can note a peak of jewelry craftsmanship in Shkodër during two recent decades. This town has for a long period been the most populated urban centre in the territory of present-day Albania. Jewelry craftsmanship has been developing there since the Antiquity promoted with silver and gold reserves in the area of Trepcha and Novo Brdo (present-day Kosovo) (Kovačević 1964; Čirković 1981; Statovci 1982; Новик 1997).



fig. 6 - Ulcinj, Monetenegro. View of the Old Fortress and new houses. 2014.
Photo of Alexander Novik.

During the Ottoman period (beginning in the 14-15th cent.) jewelers created their objects not only for the town market and the nearest area, but also for distant regions where the beauty and quality of Shkodër objects had extremely high reputation and the very objects were really prestigious (Fig. 7).

Unfortunately, nowadays there are no more than six to seven craftsmen that still carry on their jewelry-producing traditions in Shkodër, namely: Marin Gjoni, Teodor Pici, Nikolin Jakova, Loro Zojzi and some others (MAЭ № 1936: 24). They know how to work with precious metals as the masters of the past did: they create delicate filigree, emboss / chase silver plates, polish the jewels, recreate the adornments that existed on the territory of Northern Albania many centuries ago (Arti 1953; Arti 1976).

All these craftsmen know each other and have different opinions about the skills of one another. Though, altogether they withstand the new craftsmen that have recently come to the towns from rural areas or to the local ones that have opened

their shops in recent years and produce mass items that are neither of high quality nor of artistic taste.



fig. 7 - Precious household good “Shoe”. Silver. Main techniques: granulation, filigree. Beginning of the XX century. Production: Shkodër, Albania. Collection of Bep Lufi, jeweler from Shkodër, Albania. 2009. Photo of Alexander Novik.

All these craftsmen are Catholics. Traditionally, the craftsmen who dealt with silver in Shkodër were of Catholic faith, while the Muslims did not practice this craft. Among the latter, especially with the expansion of Muslim influence, oriental values and points became quite important (Иванова 1982; Иванова 1994; Новик 1995). For example, golden jewelry and needlework gained their popularity (Новик 2008: 112-126; Новик 2009: 24; Новик 2009: 232-247; Новик 2010а: 288-293; Новик 2012: 290-303).

Nevertheless, the reputation of the jewelers in Shkodër and Shkodër region has always been the highest.

Jewelry production in the towns of Shkodër, Ulcinj and Prizren is mainly concentrated in the hands of Albanians. Jewelers' dynasties have been working there for centuries. Cross-check questioning made during the expeditions shows that many of the craftsmen of Ulcinj had either moved there from the region of Kosovo (mainly from Prizren and Pristina) or are descendants of those who moved from Kosovo to the south of Montenegro. In the resort area of the former Yugoslavia the demand for jewelry has always been higher than in the in-land territories of the country. The demand formed the offer, so the jewelers went to work to the areas where they could sell their articles. The process of jewelers' migration from Kosovo to Montenegro took place in the 1970-1980-s.

After the disintegration of Yugoslavia, especially in the 2000s, jewelers of Kosovo continued to move to the regions where their articles had the call. Comparing to the instable economical situation in Kosovo, Montenegrin market seems to be very attractive thanks to the increasing number of tourists.

Albanian jewelers also work in Budva, Podgorica and other towns, but there, unlike the situation in Ulcinj, not all of them like to demonstrate their ethnic affiliation. You can often see Serbian/Montenegrin names on the shop signs, while the owner's mother tongue is Albanian.

In Ulcinj Albanians form the majority of population, so the jewelers in the downtown area do not feel the need to hide their ethnic origin. A wide variety of jeweler shops strikes your eye in this relatively small town. Most of them sell golden objects of modern design of made in "oriental" style (Аверинцев 1973). There are also many shops selling silver objects, and those made in filigree technique among them. Despite the fact that most of the craftsmen are of Kosovar origin, the town has its own

particular style of silver jewelry. It includes earrings, bracelets and pendants with zoomorphic and floral ornaments².

Jewelers –natives from Kosovo– have also settled down in the towns of the Dalmatian region. Many craftsmen working in the filigree technique and in modern manners (moulding and punchwork) live in Split, Zagreb, Dubrovnik etc. It's very characteristic that the items here are made of both gold and silver. Traditionally, rich citizens of seaside areas preferred items made of gold. Golden earrings in the technique of filigree and granulation (graining\incarnation) enriched the costumes of Dalmatian women. Nowadays almost all the jewelry shops of Split, Dubrovnik and other towns offer gold jewelry in ethnic style made by Albanian craftsmen, though only a few owners will take courage saying this.

In Kosovo itself, in the centers of Prizren, Pristina, Gjakova (Fig. 8) and some others there are only a few craftsmen that still have skills to make gold filigree and continue in doing so (МАЭ № 1861; МАЭ № 1862; МАЭ № 1936; МАЭ № 1937; МАЭ № 1987; МАЭ № 1988). This decay of craft was caused, in the first place, by the low wages paid. The high cost of the material, as well as the time intensive hard work of the craftsmen making golden filigree jewelry is very expensive. In most cases, the local population can not afford this jewelry. This decay of the craft was caused, in the first place, by the low level of paying capacity of people. The high cost of the material, a lot of work that the craftsman has to do and the time he has to spend make golden filigree jewelry very expensive. Local population in most cases can't afford this jewelry. That is why some of the

² Compare to: (Мустафа 1959; Народное 1959; Богатырёв 1971; Gjergji 1989; Tirta 1990).

craftsmen who are really masters of golden filigree have moved to Croatia where there is a call for their work.



Fig. 8 - Albanian Symbol – Eagle with two heads. Silver, artificial corunds. Main techniques: filigree. 2010-s years. Author: Gëzim Zherka. Production: Prishtina, Kosovo. Dyqan ('shop') of Gëzim Zherka. Prishtina. Kosovo. 2012. Photo of Alexander Novik.

One of the important centers of weaponry production and decoration in the Western Balkans was Prizren (Haskuka 1976; Drishti 1977a; Drishti 1977b). This town was a crossing of trade routes from the inner regions to the sea-ports. Jewelers of Prizren were well-known for their skills during the Ottoman period and continue keeping this position nowadays (Новик 2010б: 447). By the way, there is a Kosovar proverb: it's worth living in Pristina, enjoying your life and spending money in Prizren and dying in Gjakova. Jewelers' shops ("shop" – Alb. *dyqan*, *-i* < Turkish) have been one of the things that created such a prestigious image of the town (Fig. 9).



fig. 9 - Brezi i nuses ('fiancee belt, belt for wedding'). Three items. Silver, gold plated silver. Technique: filigree. Modern work. Production: Prizren, Kosovo. Dyqan ('shop') of Gjon Marku. Prizren. Kosovo. 2013. Photo of Alexander Novik.

Jewelry is one of the rare crafts that managed to survive during the industrialization period from the end of the 19th up to the beginning of the 20th cent. by saving the skills, traditions and, in a large measure, the range of objects. Jewelers' dynasties

(Fig. 10) are usually respected in their hometowns and downtown areas, and their reputation quite oftenly attains a certain national or even international publicity (we can name here the artist-jeweler Simon Shiroka from the former Yugoslavia).



fig. 10 - Jeweler working in the technique *savat* at own *dyqan* ('shop') "Gjon Marku". Prizren. Kosovo. 2012. Photo of Alexander Novik.

At the same time jewelers of Shkodër, Ulcinj and Prizren face some serious problems. Each year traditional objects disappear from the market and craftsmen begin to produce modern style jewelry, because they are more popular and will easily be bought by the customers. Therefore, traditional jewelry is getting to be a rare thing hardly to be found anymore (like, for example, men jewelry called *qostek*). This seems to be hopeless situation. But, at the same time, there is still hope that jewelry tradition will survive in these towns and will delight future generations.

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